

# The qualitative change from naturalistic to transcendental space in selected paintings by El Greco

Estelle A Maré

Doctoral graduate.

History of Art and Visual Culture Studies, University of the Free State.

The first group of El Greco's paintings discussed in this article are all naturalistic representations of the Annunciation theme and are chosen from his Italian period. The examples of his later paintings are chosen from the Spanish period and include various themes. These paintings are discussed with reference to encounters between human and angelic figures in transcendental space. The aim of this research is to emphasize El Greco's radical shift in El Greco's representation of space and the transposition of the viewer from a static mode of seeing to a more subjective, visionary awareness.

## Die kwalitatiewe verandering van naturalistiese na transendentale ruimte in geselekteerde skilderye deur El Greco

Die eerste groep skilderye deur El Greco wat in hierdie artikel bespreek word, is almal naturalistiese voorstellings van die Aankondigingstema wat uit sy Italiaanse tydperk gekies is. Die voorbeelde van sy latere werke is uit sy Spaanse tydperk gekies en sluit verskeie temas in. Hierdie skilderye word met verwysing na ontmoetings tussen mens- en engelefigure in transendentale ruimte bespreek. Die doel met die navorsing is om die radikale verskuiwing in El Greco se voorstelling van ruimte te benadruk, asook die verplasing van die aanskouer van 'n statiese wyse van kyk na 'n mere subjektiewe, visionêre bewuswording.

Throughout his career El Greco painted various versions of the Annunciation in which the representation of the spatial settings varies greatly. In the first part of this article the focus will be on three Italian paintings (1567-1576) in which he attempted to represent space according to the rules of Albertian linear perspective, in which the viewer is subjected to a static mode of seeing. In the second part paintings for discussion are chosen from El Greco's Spanish period (1577-1612). These include versions of the Annunciation and other themes in which the viewer is confronted with visionary representations of encounters between human and angelic figures situated in transcendental or sacred space. The viewing and interpretation of the latter group of works require a more subjective awareness than the earlier paintings in which the settings approximate a physical reality.

## El Greco's Italian depictions of the Annunciation theme

The iconography of the meeting between Gabriel and the Virgin evolved in the Byzantine tradition, and to a large extent remained the basis of the Trecento and Quattrocento interpretations of the Annunciation. A most notable late Byzantine example is the *Modena triptych* (figure 1), signed by a certain "Domenikos" and, therefore, widely attributed to El Greco. However, its aesthetic quality does not lend status to the painter's reputation, even as a juvenile attempt at painting in miniature. Like most figures in the triptych, the angel in the Annunciation scene is anatomically crude and stiffly stylized. However, the representation fits into the category that Duwe (1988: 34) describes:

*Dem göttlichen Mysterium entsprachen die immateriellen Bildzeichen, d.h. das heilige Geschehen wurde dem Betrachter in seinem Sinngehalt als geistiger Vorgang durch Sinnzeichen vermittelt, bei denen die auftretenden Gestalten einzig als Symbole agieren. Sie waren immaterielle, nicht fassbare Wesen, waren Übermittler des Göttlichen, Heiligen und*

*Übernatürlichen, beim Thema der Marienverkündigung Beteiligte der divina conversatio.*

[The immaterial symbols represent the divine mystery, ie the sacred event communicated to the viewer in its material substance as a spiritual event depicted in sensual terms. The figures portrayed have an exclusively symbolic significance. They were immaterial beings without substance, and as such they served as intermediaries between the divine, the sacred and the supernatural, ie as participants in the *Divina conversatio* (divine conversation) depicted in representing the theme of the Annunciation. (Own translation)]



**Figure 1**  
**Domenikos (attributed to El Greco),**  
***Annunciation from the Modena triptych.***  
**Ca 1569, Galleria Estense, Modena.**

The encounter between an angelic and a human figure is described in Luke 1: 26-38 where an account is given of the visitation of the Virgin by the Archangel Gabriel to announce the birth of the Christ Child. In virtue of this text the iconography of the Annunciation became more or less standardized in pre-Renaissance art, even though the various artists' representations include or omit details relating to the setting of the event,

or emphasize different aspects of the encounter between the two figures in order to convey the message visually. Indeed, in all Annunciation scenes the archangel himself is the visual message - featuring prominently in the composition in which the suggested movement of his figure implies his arrival on the terrestrial plane where he greets the addressee. In most Annunciation representations, he greets the Virgin with his hand raised "in the ancient gesture denoting speech" (Schiller 1971a: 38). She is then usually depicted as modestly crossing her hands over her breast or turning slightly away from the direction of his approach, an attitude that suggests being taken by surprise by the appearance of the visitor and his "speech".

According to Christian dogma, the delivery of Gabriel's message to the Virgin is the last link in the chain of salvation brought by Christ, who takes on human form through her. The Virgin is therefore considered blessed for being chosen to bear the Christ Child who brings to humanity the possibility of redemption and immortality. Thus, a purely visual interpretation of a representation of the Annunciation is inadequate. Without extratextual knowledge based on biblical evidence and other sources, only a very literal interpretation of the scene is possible. Collins (1991: 17) explains that "the audient spectator of an oral performance must know how to look and what to see; but the reader of a written text [or: viewer of a painted image] must do all this through the mediation of graphic symbols and, moreover, contextualize these verbal cues with supplementary, extratextual details." Likewise, the viewer of a painted image needs supplementary information - not only the information from the biblical source, but also information on the meaning of the pictorial iconographic tradition. In myriad Byzantine, Medieval, Renaissance and later Annunciation scenes the Archangel Gabriel clearly

plays the role of narrator or rhetorician. But what message does he convey? We know that, according to the above-mentioned passage in Luke he announced to the Virgin that she would bear a son, which surprised her greatly. The exact moment of the Annunciation is also the moment that Jesus the Redeemer, Logos or Word, becomes incarnate.

In his authenticated Italian works El Greco consistently emphasized the physical movement of both angelic and human figures, a lifelike movement that, during the Renaissance, superseded the symbolic tradition to which Due refers. The same applies to the three versions of the Annunciation selected for discussion.

In figure 2, a painting of very small format, one finds the first reference to an angel and *putti* in the Italian painting of El Greco. The presentation shows that, as a novice to the Renaissance tradition, El Greco still had much to learn, especially about the representation of three-dimensional space and the perspective construction which has been devised to enable painters to depict quasi-realistic relationships between figures and objects. Here El Greco attempted to portray the *divina conversatio* in an architectural setting represented by means of linear perspective. However, the rendering of the receding lines of the steps of the podium supporting the lectern on which the Virgin rests a book and the receding grid formed by the courtyard paving are maladroit.

A most interesting formal aspect of this painting is El Greco's attempt at depicting the movement of the angel who is borne on a moving cloud form from a side entrance towards the Virgin. The supernatural cloud mass on which the angel descends is tentatively twisted in the form of a spiral and rendered with the same technique of laden brush strokes as the translucent light, which suggests divine intervention in the scene below. The descending cloud, as depicted by El

Greco, is not a natural phenomenon and its movement seems to contradict the geometrical construction of the setting in which it appears. This confirms Hubert Damisch's (2002: 145) observation that in some instances in sixteenth-century painting "clouds ... introduced a contradiction into the very heart of the representation, by denoting a rent ion the human space and a more or less brutal insertion of a dimension of transcendence into the system of depiction that depended upon geometric coordinates."



Figure 2  
El Greco, *Annunciation*. 1570-75, canvas,  
26x19 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

In this early Annunciation there is a self-activating or divinely activated force inherent in the moving cloud as the "vehicle" of the angel. The body of the angel also reveals the artist's awareness of the sixteenth-century ideal figural composition which is based on the form of a wire wound in a spiral around a cone. Like the cloud, this angelic figure, whose robe is somewhat agitated by his movement, fits into the *figura serpentinata* form, but in a somewhat tentative manner.

Bodily movement in the early *Annunciation* is furthermore suggested in the angelic figure's semi-kneeling position. He has alighted, but will rise after the delivery of his message. This is suggested through the muscular tension of his legs and the outstretched wings. The physique of the angel, revealed beneath swirling drapery, is not far removed from Michelangelo's *ignudi*, which El Greco may have studied from prints available in Venice. The movement of the angel and of the *putti* above suggests a heavenly apparition in an effulgence of light, which radiates towards the earthbound form of the kneeling Virgin who gently turns her head away from her book, towards the angelic messenger.

This representation of El Greco's earliest *Annunciation* belongs to the category of *historia* painting which Alberti defined as the most important aspect of a painter's work. The figures are rendered to reflect the concepts of "*virt*", "*onore*" and "*nobilit*", which is reminiscent of Alberti's ideal that perspective was the means by which an elevated existence could be represented. However, artificial perspective as a system of depiction basically afforded Renaissance artists the opportunity for the imaginative visualization of the material world, even though it depended on techniques to represent an illusion of the visible world on a two-dimensional picture plane, as Janis Calen Bell (1996: 486) reminds us: "At its simplest, linear perspective relies on the way in which sets of inclined lines tend to be read as signalling some degree of space behind the surface on which they are drawn." To be meaningful, perspective space also requires "a stable and coherent space which Carol Wilde (1994: 15) succinctly defines as "a space where the ordering of parts making up the content can be made visible and coherent and intelligible." Since the construction of a *historia* as the painter's ideal required the representation of such a homogeneous space, the linear

system of perspective answered the need. It required "exact projective geometry, so that the system that 'connects' unit areas in the depicting surface with corresponding units in the depicted world can be given more or less mathematical precision" (Harrison 2000: 253).



Figure 3  
El Greco, *Annunciation*.  
1570, canvas, 107x93 cm, Collection Julio  
Mu-os, Barcelona.

This is what El Greco attempted to do in his first *Annunciation*. As a consequence of creating a direct line of sight as required of a *historia* painting the viewer is placed in the same spatial continuum as the alighting angel so that he or she may identify him- or herself emotionally with the message delivered by the angel. El Greco succeeded in creating a geometricized *locus* for the elevated event, but presumably also intended to reflect Alberti's (1976: 103 & 105) system of moral values and the attainment of spiritual insight. The *Annunciation* theme became one of the most popular in El Greco's iconographic repertory, repeated throughout his career, always with variations in the figures and the setting. The two other Italian versions, referred to as the second and the third versions (numbered figures 3 and 4

respectively), were both commenced after the first version.



**Figure 4**  
**El Greco, *Annunciation*.**  
 1575-76, canvas, 117x98 cm, Collection Contini-Bonacossi, Florence.

In the Prado version (figure 2) the figure of the angel resembles that of an athlete which may reveal the influence Michelangelo's muscular figures initially had on El Greco. In the second and third versions (figures 3 and 4) El Greco's manner of painting is different. The angels have been modified to become somewhat more elongated, and are based on the composition of the serpentine line. Both are markedly less muscular. In these versions the Virgin is portrayed as less pensive and more innocently beautiful, in keeping with the stylized elegance of the angels who approach her. These angelic figures, like the first one, are twisted to reveal a three-quarters view of the torso, but their faces are in a profile. The resultant S-curvature is very pronounced, especially in the angel of the third version (figure 4a). This figure seems to move effortlessly, powered independently of the

propelling force of his wings, which are partially obscured behind his back.



**Figure 4a**  
 Diagram showing the spiral form of the angel in figure 4.

It is also worth noting that in the third version El Greco has eliminated the perspective construction of the architectural setting, except for the demarcation of the paving grid. This grid now reveals a pattern, which is different from that of the first unsuccessful attempt to achieve implied spatial depth in a naturalistic setting. The focus in the figural composition is on the directness of communication, and the figures' movement towards one another is emphasized, while references to the material objects necessary for suggesting an earthly setting are reduced to the bare necessities.

El Greco probably modelled his versions of the Annunciation on paintings by Titian, such as his *Annunciation* in San Salvatore, Venice, as well as on Tintoretto's version in the Scuola di San Rocco. However, Wethey (1962b: 31-2) quite rightly comments that:

The iconography of [El Greco's] *Annunciation* is completely Venetian in origin in all the examples of [his] Italian period although no work by Titian or any other painter is literally reproduced.

The lily that Titian's angel bears in his left hand is a Christian transformation of the caduceus of Hermes or Mercury. In reference to other prototypes El Greco changes this divine messenger's wand into a staff with the emblem of the cross. In Roman times the messenger's wand became a sign of authority or rank in addition to its traditional emblematic significance. Other deviations from Titian are the rearrangement of the figures of the Virgin and the angel, and a changed setting. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the cloud on which the angel enters in Tintoretto's San Rocco version is reproduced by El Greco in both his versions, a detail which is also present in the *Annunciation* scene of the *Modena triptych*. In this respect, El Greco continues the tradition of presenting the messenger as a heavenly emanation. In the third version he emulates the swirling garments of the vertically hovering angel in Tintoretto's picture. In none of the versions does El Greco elongate the format as Titian did in the San Salvatore version, even though he quotes Titian's iconography by introducing swirling *putti* above the heads of the main figures. Thus, in becoming an artist in his own right, he never made exact copies of the works of any artist.

With regard to El Greco's Italian representations of the *Annunciation*, David Robb's (1936: 520) statement on his deviation from prototypes generally rings true:

Though the fourteenth and fifteenth century artists had much more freedom than their immediate predecessors in the plastic realization of their ideas, they unconsciously conformed to traditions, and their significance consists in the way their works are both invested with and set out against those traditions.

The very fact that El Greco's paintings are filled with references to Titian, reveals the learning curve he

followed in his quest to achieve a personal *maniera*.<sup>1</sup> According to sixteenth-century aesthetic theory an artist's works were also required to incorporate innovative elements. This El Greco succeeded in doing even in his early versions of the *Annunciation* theme. In later versions, painted in Spain, the artist treated the theme of the angel delivering the message to Mary in a more personal and inventive manner. It therefore seems more appropriate to discuss examples of his later Spanish paintings thematically under the heading "Reorientation in sacred space".

### **El Greco's representation of transcendental space in his Spanish paintings**

As explained above, at the outset of his Italian period El Greco became a practitioner of linear perspective, a method of composition conceived from the vantage point of a viewer around whom space is a visible reality and the illusory space of the painting an extension of his or her physical reality. However, in his later Spanish paintings El Greco abandoned the straight lines and grid-like constructs which he had previously used to suggest a third dimension. Instead of creating measurable relationships, he sanctified space so that it ceased to be only a continuum between the viewer and the figures within the composition. Also, the earthly zones in his paintings became detached from phenomenal reality. By the midpoint in his career, when El Greco painted the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*,<sup>2</sup> this tendency had become pronounced. Thereafter, the artist barely suggested physical localities and profane space in order to reorient his figures in sacred space, or eternity, and bring heaven down to earth, a tendency evident in the versions of the *Baptism of Christ*.<sup>3</sup>

In the chosen examples profane space is largely eliminated. To interpret these examples require a reorientation of the viewer because the represented space becomes informed with transcendental

meaning and is transformed into a continuum of ascending compositional configurations based on spiral forms (figures 5, 6, 7 and 8). In a complementary way, the divine source of grace reaches out from above as a downward spiralling configuration. Space and implied movement thus incorporate the viewer into the domain of God's emanating grace and redemptive power and the viewer is irresistibly drawn into this aura of spiritual unity of what is below and above and becomes an eyewitness to visions beyond earthly events.

By emphasising a spiritual, inner world as the primary source of his inspiration, El Greco's *Idea* was no longer realized through his observation of nature, or even by means of his emulation of the work of recognized masters of a naturalistic approach to representational art. Instead, El Greco shifted the emphasis from rendering an illusion of reality, as in Renaissance painting, to a consistent Neoplatonic approach in which the artist becomes the counterpart of the Divine Creator who reveals an alternative world of grace, and not what can be outwardly observed. In his later works he followed his *disegno interno* exclusively, which, according to Zuccari (1607), derives from *segno di Dio in noi*. It is the spark of divinity (the mystical *Fünklein*) which inspires the artist according to Neoplatonist theory.

In the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figures 5 and 5a) the saints are represented in three-quarter length, presumably standing on the earthly plane which is not depicted, while angels flank the Virgin and Child enthroned on a cloud, between heaven and earth. Earthly references have been eliminated. The figures are arranged in a strict symmetrical scheme, lost in adoration, with their hands appropriately still and drawn towards their breasts, thus reflecting an introspective, spiritual mood. The

physical movement of limbs is totally eliminated. Instead, energy flows in the spiralling lines of force that elevate the Virgin like an angelic figure between heaven and earth.



Figure 5  
*El Greco, Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina.*  
 1597-99, 193x102 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

The celestial region, which consists only of a burst of light around the descending dove and several *putti* in the Prado version (figure 2), is extended in a late *Annunciation* (figure 6) by including an ensemble of angels that accompany the messenger angel. The iconography deviates from earlier representations of this theme. The dove has disappeared and the flames of the lilies between the protagonists have taken the place of the

Holy Spirit, while the gesture of the angel has become introspective and the Virgin faces him more directly.



Figure 5a

Diagram showing the spiral forms of the Virgin and Child in figure 5.

In this *Annunciation*, spirals are present in many details of the composition, especially in the flames and the dress of the angel who has only partially arrested his movement as one wing is still outstretched and the opposite foot is striding forward. His body is distinctly elongated in the form of a spiral and it resembles the individual flame-like lilies at the side of the Virgin. In the figure of the angel the flame and the spiral are literally connected. All details become flame-like and move in the fiery presence of sacred light.



Figure 6

El Greco, *Annunciation*.  
1596-1600, canvas, 315x174 cm,  
Balaguer Museum, Villanueva y Geltru  
(Barcelona).

David Davies's (1990: 33) general statement about El Greco's later manner of depiction rings true with reference to the *Annunciation*:

[He] clearly makes no reference to the life model. The elongation of figures, with their relatively small heads, is more exaggerated so that they assume flame-like shapes. Indeed, all the forms are in a state of flux.

But, in what sense can the figures be so elongated that they assume flame-like shapes? Looking at a diagrammatic analysis of this late version of the *Annunciation* (figure 6a), one notices that the angel is indeed elongated and that his

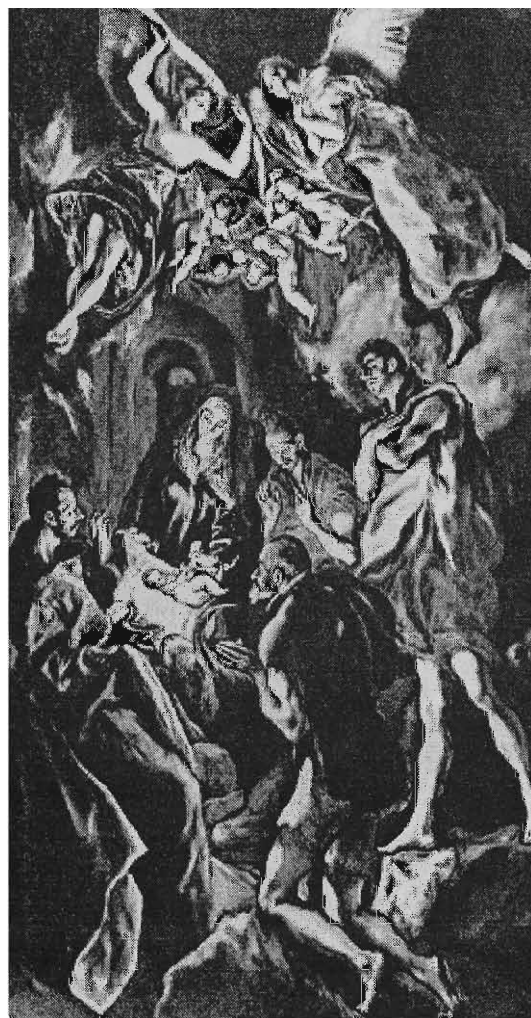


head is small. The "flux" and "flame-like" movement can be described more accurately as an elongated vortex that is diagonally inclined to suggest the forcefulness and direction of movement.



**Figure 6a**  
Diagram showing the spiral form of the angel in figure 6.

In the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 7), the figures above and below are united in a helix-like composition. The whirling forms of the two angels above, accompanied by *putti*, form a celestial field of force and are the reflectors of the light that illuminates the earthly zone of which the Christ child is the centre, thus uniting heaven and earth in the composition.



**Figure 7**  
El Greco, *Adoration of the shepherds*  
1612-14, canvas, 320-180 cm, Prado Museum,  
Madrid.

In *St Joseph and the Child* (figure 8) a descending angel, flanked by *putti*, is represented above the head of St Joseph, adding to the meaning of the scene. His religious significance is explained by Halldor Soehner (1961: 26) as follows:

*[E]l gran ángel vestido tiene en su diestra un lirio, el símbolo de la inocencia y de la pureza de alma, el símbolo de la virtud de San José, por su casto desposorio con María. En su mano izquierda tiene un manojo de rosas, que el ángel de la derecha esparce sobre el Santo. La rosa es el símbolo del amor y del júbilo celestial. Aquí surge por vez primera este símbolo que fué después tan frecuente en la iconografía de San José, como muestra de su puro amor hacia la Madre y el Hijo, y el mismo tiempo como "premio de sus virtudes", en el que se expresa la alegría celestial por su conducta. El angelote de la izquierda trae una corona de laureles, el símbolo de la fama eterna, que el Santo patriarca ha merecido por su conducta ejemplar. El*

*ensalzamiento apoteósico de San José por el grupo de ángeles encuentra su confirmación literaria en el verso del pedestal de David: "Vástago del Unigénito, regirá en nuestra ciudad eternamente, como un fruto lleno de semilla."*



**Figure 8**  
**El Greco, St Joseph and the Child.**  
 1597-99, canvas, 109x56 cm, Santa Cruz  
 Museum, Toledo.

One may add to the above understanding of the symbolic meaning of the work and its allegorical references by focussing on the composition of the angelic group. The central angel is formally composed to represent a tour de force of descending movement. The movement of this angel comprises a swirling of forms, a vortex of drapery which is caught up in the curving motions

of the *putti* and which is linked to the S-curve of the figure of St Joseph. Heaven is brought down to earth and this process erases mundane reality. As an earthly reference the landscape background is both miniaturized and abstracted. Heaven is brought down to the level of the human figures. The movement of the angel above the heads of St Joseph and the Child melts into and is enhanced by the dramatized sky over the very low horizon against which the elongated form of St Joseph stands in dematerialized outline. The energy of the limited celestial region flows downward through the vertical form of St Joseph, and through his cloak over his left shoulder, which is coiled towards his hand which shelters the Child's head.



**Figure 9**  
**El Greco, Trinity**  
 1577-79, canvas, 300x178 cm, Prado Museum,  
 Madrid.



**Figure 9a**  
Diagram showing the spiral forms of the dead Christ and a flanking angel in figure 9.

The visual energy moves towards the long staff with its rounded top, and this completes and closes the circuit of energetic movement. The figures of St Joseph and the Child are integrated with the sky in which the angel and *putti* may be said to be celestial fields of force. The spatial orientation of the "principal vectors"<sup>4</sup> raises the level of tension in the composition, and this inextricably unifies the verticality of form and the direction of the movement. Indeed, El Greco elicits in the viewer of *St Joseph and the Child* a "dramatic and spiritual response, a quickening of the spirit" (Davies 1990: 31) by means of the stylistic devices he applies.



**Figure 10**  
El Greco, *Annunciation*  
1596, canvas, 114x67 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano.

The S-curve, which is a "departure from the straight line", conforms to Quintilian's ideal of ornate diction and may in turn be transformed into other types of continuous curving lines. From the S-curve, which became very common in Mannerist painting, El Greco developed more complex spiral forms such as the vortex and helix. He often reserved the helix form, which may be conceptualized as a wire wound round a cylinder, for the figures of angels flanking main, centrally placed figures, such as Christ and the Virgin. The *Trinity* (figure 9) is an early Spanish example in which the angel standing to the left serves as an upright post, supporting the weight of Christ's body, which, by contrast, sags down and is inscribed in a *serpentinata* or S-curve (figure 9a). Besides this curve

there is a helical twist in his body with shoulders and hips offset at opposing and corresponding angles. Likewise, the body of the Christ child in *the Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figure 5a) follows this pattern.



Figure 10a  
Diagram showing the spiral form of the angel  
in figure 10.

A double S-curve can be woven into a tight rope-like form or coil that is suggestive of greater strength than any individual strand. Used in this way, coils suggest movement when they are depicted in the details of angels' silken garments, for example in the late Lugano *Annunciation* (figures 10 and 10a) in which a restless pattern suggests the urgency of the angel's arrival in a way that has developed beyond the stylistic forms of the earlier *Annunciations*. Blown by currents of divine breath, which also transform the lilies at his feet into flames,

the angel enters into the presence of the Virgin.



Figure 11  
El Greco, *Annunciation*.  
1600-05, canvas, 128x84 cm, *Museum*, Toledo  
(Ohio).

El Greco also applies the coil as a reinforced line to suggest, for example, the transformation of clouds into forms associated with and enhancing the appearance of the angels, which is notable in the Toledo (Ohio) *Annunciation* where the clouds above and below the angel link him to heaven and earth (figures 11 and 11a). The coil is a frequent feature in the drapery of El Greco's figures. The form of the angel to the right of the composition is based on the helix. Its curves follow the irregular spiralling pattern of the angel's garments, widening into the central space of the composition. In this way, the *sacra*

*conversatio* is dominated by the angelic presence to whom the Virgin looks up. Her figure is almost overwhelmed by the closeness of the angel's presence. In this composition El Greco deviates from both traditional Annunciation iconography and his earlier approach to the subject in which the centre of the picture draws the beholder's eye into the spatial depth of the physical setting, as in the Italian examples.



Figure 11a  
Diagram showing the spiral form of the angel  
in figure 11.

## Conclusion

In El Greco's paintings angels appear in the existential space of earthbound humans as cosmic forces associated with the heavens, there to make messages visible that come from a divine source. The manner in which he depicted imaginary beings reveals the scope of his artistic imagination and his ability to communicate his suprasensual knowledge of both religion and aesthetics to the beholder. Since the role of the angel is to be a messenger, that is to communicate,

he is not unlike the artist who communicates his message to those who are receptive. Those who can interpret it will be spiritually able, willing and ready to receive the message. In this they should be in a state of grace and therefore prepared to accept a visionary revelation, striving after the mystical experience of unification (*unio mystica*). Hence, it comes as no surprise that Wethey (1962a: 57) identifies a medieval concept underlying El Greco's vision of art as the world of the spirit:

El Greco more than any other master illustrates the return to the mediaeval Scholastic belief that a work of art comes into being through a knowledge of God rather than from experience in the physical world. It is a curious circumstance that the late Mannerist painters, Lomazzo and Federigo Zuccaro, expressed this theory so fully in their writings, yet not they but El Greco alone was able to realize in a memorable way its profoundest implications.

Under the influence of Neoplatonism, El Greco used his portrayal of angels as a vehicle of his imagination, turning them into ideal forms, which human beings cannot attain on earth, but towards which they may aspire. "Since the soul no longer possesses its objects, it must possess images", EW Warren (1966: 279) wrote to describe Plotinus's notion of the imagination. Even so, El Greco transformed his angels into an unearthly species of spirals. His representation of angelic figures does not specifically conform to any system of angelology evolved by any Christian theologian, or even to other representations of angels by previous artists. Instead the angelic figures in his paintings are the product of his own imagination. In this sense one may assert Leonardo's (1956: 61) claim that El Greco's paintings are "of such excellence that it not only investigates the works of nature, but infinitely more than those that nature produces". Truly, El Greco is the heir of the creative and theoretical ideals, which dominated the late Renaissance, "[when] the visual arts were governed by rational procedures of discovery and making, which could be

given almost infinite extension by imaginative invention, rather than by capricious creativity" (Kemp 1977: 397).

In the same vein Norman Bryson (1983: 107) draws a fundamental distinction between two stages of perspectival painting in terms of the requirements of physicality and spatial locatedness that the system imposed on the spectator:

What we are really observing in the first geological age of perspective, the epoch of the vanishing point, is the transformation of subject into object: like the camera, the painting of perspective clears away the diffuse, non-localised nebula of imaginary definitions and substitutes a definition from the outside. In its final form ... the only position for the viewing subject proposed and assumed by the image will be that of the Gaze, a transcendent point of vision that has discarded the body ... and exists only as a disembodied *punctum*.

The transition from what Bryson calls the "Glance to the Gaze" - that is from the vanishing point to the *punctum* [point in time, an abstraction] - also characterizes El Greco's representations when he shook off the shackles of the "first geological age of perspective" and the Albertian model which required the geometrization of space, characterized as a "static mode of seeing" (Frangenberg 1986: 159). The conception of perspective, which requires that a picture be taken in at a glance, without the beholder moving the head or turning the eye, however, is not consistent with the physiology and psychology of vision. Thus, Florentine *disegno* and its rhetorization of visual composition changed when "the judgement of the eye" was postulated. In the new mode of representation, derived from Zuccari's (1607) "idea", El Greco changed his mode of representation of space from the natural to the transcendental. The abstraction of sacred space was substituted for measurable physical space, and the visionary encounter was substituted for visual rhetoric.

Zuccari believed that the term originated from the phrase *segno di dio in*

*noi*, or "the sign of God in us", indicating that those skilled in drawing were divinely inspired. He nevertheless emphasized the importance of intellect in the creation of art by drawing a distinction between *disegno interno* and *disegno esterno*, denoting the artistic form observed in the mind, as well as the idea expressed in the art object. Summers (1987: 306) draws the conclusion that to Zuccari "*maniera*" meant the "transformation of appearance by personal craft or 'vision'". Ultimately it "meant more than individual style, more than the painter's individual 'vision'; it was the consequence of individual 'gifts' and experience". He also points out that El Greco "vehemently insisted not just on judgement and practice, but that the virtues of judgement and practice were the substance of the art of painting" (Summers 1987: 308). Judgement meant the judgement of the eye (*giudisio dell'occhio*). An artist such as Michelangelo, who have achieved greatness in all the major arts, rejected the tyranny of fixed or conventionalized proportions based on geometric constructs. In a statement that is his eulogy to painting, El Greco rejects the idea that harmony in painterly composition can be attained with geometry.

David Summers (1987: 294) furthermore points out that since the *disegno* of compositional design was rooted in the spiritual quality of the *disegno interno* there was a close relationship between *disegno interno* and *nove inventioni*, and they were therefore related to the *sprezzatura* of individual *ingegno*, the ennobling power by which the artist made the image seem alive with *grazia*. In El Greco's art, movement attains the meaning of a *disegno interno* and becomes symbolic of the transcending spiritual aspirations of the figures represented. El Greco not only intensified the serpentine movement of figures, but turned this stylistic device

into a symbol of the flame which complements the suggested aspirations of figures. He employed the continuous serpentine line or various other spiral forms to convey the movement of angels, who are spiritual beings, and for whom the winged human figure became an artistic metaphor in Christian art.

Before El Greco's arrival in Italy, Michelangelo and Mannerist artists such as Bronzino (1503-1572), Salviati (1510-1563) and Tintoretto (ca 1519-1594) had experimented with figural forms derived from the S-curve, which became the conventionalized *figure serpentine*. El Greco extended the range of their experiments by creating figures that he increasingly elongated in a continuous curvature. To fit these figures he also elongated the format of his paintings to become distinctly vertical. This enabled him to break away from the restrictions of the centralized perspective grid that characterize his early Italian works. El Greco "opened" the Albertian experience of so-called "window-gazing" (Grayson 1972: 13), which is based on the geometry of the pyramid of vision as described in the optical treatises of antiquity, in favour of mystical vision whereby transcendental space is substituted for naturalistic space. El Greco used the vertical emphasis of his composition and his figural elongation to achieve a symbolic "upward" movement in a way that is markedly different from the Albertian naturalistic ideal and achieved a qualitative change from naturalistic to transcendental space. However, as Damisch (2002: 148) points out, "The very same illusionist means that serve to construct a three-dimensional space are used to break its closure and impose the image of a vision that contradicts the very notion of representation."

## Notes

1. This article is a revised version of sections from my unpublished doctoral thesis, entitled *El Greco's achievement of his personal maniera*, (University of the Free State, 2002).

2. See Maré (1999).
3. See Maré (2001).<sup>4</sup> Terminology borrowed from Rudolf Arnheim (1982: 96).

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